

Quick Facts

About...Hepatitis B

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a serious disease of the liver caused by the hepatitis B virus. Most people will recover without any complications. However, some people develop chronic (long-term) hepatitis B infection. In some people with chronic infections, hepatitis B can lead to severe illness, liver cancer, liver failure, and sometimes death.

How is hepatitis B spread?

Hepatitis B virus is spread when blood or certain body fluids, such as semen and vaginal secretions, from an infected person enter the body of a person who is not infected. Some examples include:

- Having unprotected sex with an infected partner
- Sharing needles, syringes or “works” used to inject drugs
- Sharing personal care items, such as razors or toothbrushes with an infected person
- Being born to an infected mother
- Using nonsterile needles and equipment during body piercing, tattooing, or acupuncture
- Direct contact with the blood or open sores of an infected person

An infected person with no symptoms can still spread hepatitis B to others.

Who is at risk for hepatitis B?

You get hepatitis B by direct contact with blood or certain body fluids of a person who has hepatitis B. Your risk is higher for hepatitis B if you:

- Are born to a mother who has hepatitis B
- Live in the same house with someone who has a chronic hepatitis infection
- Have unprotected sex with a person who has hepatitis B
- Have sex with more than one person in a six-month period
- Are a man who has sex with men
- Have a sexually transmitted disease
- Are an injection drug user
- Are a health care or public safety worker

- Were born or have parents who were born in Southeast Asia, Africa, the Amazon Basin in South America, the Pacific Islands, Eastern Europe, or the Middle East
- Are a resident or work in a home for the developmentally disabled
- Are a hemodialysis patient

How do I know if I have hepatitis B?

See your health care provider. Blood tests will determine if you are infected with hepatitis B. Follow-up blood tests are necessary to determine if the disease is still present. Chronic hepatitis B is diagnosed by two positive blood tests at least six months apart. Chronic infection may last for a lifetime.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is known as a “silent infection,” because you may have very mild or no symptoms. Symptoms appear six weeks to six months after exposure. Symptoms may include:

- Yellowing of the eyes or skin (jaundice)
- Lack of appetite
- Nausea and vomiting
- Fever
- Abdominal pain
- Joint pain
- Tiredness
- Dark urine
- Pale (clay-colored) stool

How can hepatitis B be treated?

In most people, the infection will clear itself. People with chronic infection should see their health care provider to determine if the disease is getting worse. Medications are available for the treatment of chronic hepatitis B, and your health care provider can decide which one is right for you. It is important to avoid further injury to your liver by:

- Avoiding alcoholic drinks
- Avoiding raw seafood
- Getting vaccinated for hepatitis A

How is hepatitis B prevented?

A safe and effective vaccine can prevent hepatitis B infection. It is recommended for all children from birth to 18 years and adults at risk for hepatitis B. See your health care provider for more information on hepatitis B vaccine.

Other ways to prevent hepatitis B infection include:

- Use latex condoms if you have sex with more than one partner
- Get tested for hepatitis B if you are pregnant
- Avoid injection drug use. If you do inject drugs, do not share drugs, needles, syringes, cookers, cotton, water or rinse cups
- Do not share razors, toothbrushes, or other personal care items
- If you are infected with hepatitis B, do not donate blood, organs, semen, or tissue
- Inform your sex partners that you are infected with hepatitis B and they should be tested
- Inform your health care providers that you are infected with hepatitis B
- Ensure that anyone living in your household receives hepatitis B vaccination

All information presented is intended for public use. For additional information about hepatitis B, please visit the following Web sites:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/index.htm>

Hepatitis B Foundation

www.hepb.org

Immunization Action Coalition

www.immunize.org

This page was last reviewed December 1, 2008.



Indiana State
Department of Health